

PERSONAL LANDSCAPE

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IDEAS ABOUT POETRY : V.

LITERATURE AND CAUSALITY.

Art does hold, as 'twere, a mirror up to nature, but cannot to any one human vision reflect what is there.

Art selects, puts a frame around the object.

The position of the eye gives disposition and composition.

The object is twice removed from the eye.

Therefore the temptation for the artist is to go further with this ordering process—a process away from life—to impose an interdependence of the reflected phenomena, to discover causality.

From this comes story, allegory, the sonnet clinched with a couplet.

Logic is a primitive scientific device applied after the event to such selected events as are capable of causal linking. It is a talisman against the bogey of the mystery of life. It is the child's way of achieving a pragmatist system of self-defence, and story appeals to the childish in us.

Applied to art it is a clumsy surgery—the reverse of creation.

Creation has nothing to do with logic or causality and the greatest literature is that which escapes from the writer's own conscious ordering—an ordering dictated to him partly by the less confident side of himself, partly by the conventional aggregate of human unadventurousness.

Shakespeare, Donne and Blake escape.

The XVIII century could not tolerate Cordelia's death.

Donne's poetry explodes out of the conventional bonds into a super-logical, or, more exactly, a pre-logical synthesis.

The chains are still too heavy upon us for us to understand Blake.

The investigation by psychology of the non-logical processes of the mind has made possible the deliberate avoidance of causality in art.

That we are not yet accustomed to this freedom is shown by the rapidity with which the Surrealists have adopted conventions of directed selectivity.

G. W.

VERGISSMEINICHT.

Three weeks gone and the combatants gone
returning over the nightmare ground
we found the place again, and found
the soldier sprawling in the sun.

The frowning barrel of his gun
overshadowing. As we came on
that day, he hit my tank with one
like the entry of a demon.

Look. Here in the gunpit spoil
the dishonoured picture of his girl
who has put : *Steffi. Vergissmenicht*
in a copybook gothic script.

We see him almost with content,
abased, and seeming to have paid
and mocked at by his own equipment
that's hard and good when he's decayed.

But she would weep to see today
how on his skin the swart flies move;
the dust upon the paper eye
and the burst stomach like a cave.

For here the lover and killer are mingled
who had one body and one heart.
And death who had the soldier singled
has done the lover mortal hurt.

Keith DOUGLAS.

ENFIDAVILLF

In the church, fallen like dancers
lie the virgin and St. Therèse
on little pillows of dust.
The detonations of the last few days
tore down the ornamental plasters.
Shivered the hands of Christ.

The men and women who moved like candles
in and out of the houses and the streets
are all gone. The white houses are bare
black cages; no one is left to greet
the ghosts tugging at doorhandles,
opening doors that are not there.

Now the daylight coming in from the fields
like a labourer, tired and sad
is peering among the wreckage, goes
past some corners as though with averted head
not looking at the pain this town holds,
seeing no one move behind the windows.

But they are coming back; they begin to search
like ants among their débris, finding in it
a bed or a piano and carrying it out.
Who would not love them at this minute?
I seem again to meet
the blue eyes of the images in the church.

Keith DOUGLAS.

A FRAGMENT OF HISTORY.

The lion of Assur and the Holy Lamb
Lie here together, and the Babylonian ram
Baas in the belltongued towers of Christendom
In spires, in domes and minarets of Islam;
The ancient vertical statement of belief.

Here in the hills the pompous tribal boast
Echoed from rock to rock and lured the host
Of plundering tartars towards the golden coast
Whose storied empires fell and left the ghost
Of glory fragmentary on the litoral.

Here were the shores the desperate pirate scourged;
From fretted isles of the Aegean surged
Those northern hordes whose very violence forged
New patterns, and with blood of shepherds merged:
So the wine flowed again, and flutes enchanted.

While the Egyptian, voyaging for trade,
Punctilious, bearded, beached his ship and stayed;
Admired the temple dancers; even prayed;
Exchange of gods, gifts, arts, and envoys made,
Who saw, from the sea recede the needed cedars.

Here too the Phoenician wrought his curious craft,
Scrawling the price of dye from right to left
In hieroglyphs familiar to the deft;
And here with an onyx seal he autographed
Papyrus promises to pay for tin.

Figures the forthright Greek reversed and hung
To hive the honey of a sweeter tongue,
Where colonies in purple Kitons sung
The odes that were to swell the Roman lung
And bring the beeline virtues to the land.

After the Satrap on the peacock terrace
Fell to the Hellene sword : of the Persian palace
Nothing remained but jasmine, rose and iris,
And shattered fragments of iridescent glass
And over Tyre and Sidon set the sun.

Then came the Consuls, and the rigid line
Of matrons, highways, aqueducts (the wine
Flowing like water) and the fine
Distinctions of the law; till the Divine
Wrath that in an instant razed Berytus.

And still Byzantium, whose fairest gem
Bedizened Byblos like a diadem
Corroding, yielded each luxurious emblem
To the mounted arab with his dagger strategem
Who spread his carpet to the damask dawn.

Then the Crusaders' lions scrambled in
Whose harps were tangled by mad Saladin
And Mameluke and Turk... till Fakhreddin
And the great Emir who made Beit ed Din
Gave back to the land its ancient ordered glory.

Now ghosts of Phaorohs whispered by the Nile
Reviving antique dreams; and, fox in guile,
The Türk contended with the crocodile
For the dominion of so rich a prize; the while
The powers of Europe poised the weighted scales.

Hugh Gordon PORTEUS.

THE SHIP.

The simple beach and the sea : And separate things
lie on this openness as on a hand ;
sea-coloured tents, a boat upon its side,
Scarlet of flags, a children's see-saw, swings,
like elementary shapes a child has drawn ;
and the mind grasps them in a stride.

Very deliberate, like a mannequin,
a full-rigged ship goes South,
and lets you tell for half an hour or more
how hollowed sails and keen unhurried bows
can be so lucid and so brave,
astonished thought finds nothing it could add,
not the hairbreadth of a line,
wing or turning wave.

No wonder mind should find this scenery bland
as lotions are to eyes ;
our loves being mostly natives of a land
mountainous, hung with forests, loud with storms :
and our thoughts climb
to light like things the digger's spade has struck,
a broken dish, a ring,
confused with dark and roots and time.

Bernard SPENCER.

THE BUILDING OF THE HOUSE.

The building of the house became a part of all our lives; how old it looked at first, like an anatomy dissected : how some inverted surgery fleshed it, nursed features from it, and eyes to see : such fancies and all the tumble and ballet of building gear, bucket and brick and rubble and all the art of ladder, hod or rope were portrait-maker's touches, cool in feeling, against whose landscape what was memorable stood sad or smiling.

Then startlingly the house was finished, and stood more weather-worthy than our bodies could : and for two life times' interval no one would see exactly what we had seen, towards the bridge and the wood.

Why was this something we had not foreseen?

By what sharp argument of brick or stone had we now first to love even those hours—and maybe find them worst to lose—which never touched us to the bone?

Bernard SPENCER.

THE IRONCLAD.

The warden of the fortress
That looks across the straits
Sits in the water tower
And gravely calculates.

The floor is paved with water
That sinks five storeys deep
Down from the warden's workroom
To the cellars of the keep.

Above the tank are levers
Within his hand's control
To make the seas magnetic
Round every spit and shoal.

An ironclad is passing,
A stranger, through the field.
She wears no jack or ensign,
Nor is her name revealed.

No man appears aboard her
From turret or barbette.
By hands within the armour
Her onward course is set.

The smoke slips from her funnels
Soft as the fleece of lamb,
And soundlessly the ripples
Sparkle around her ram.

The ironclad is gliding
Through the magnetic straits,
And in his tower the warden,
The mathematician, waits.

Charles HEPBURN.

LA ROCHEFOUCAULD.

Nous arrivons tout nouveaux aux divers âges de la vie.

“A penny for your thoughts. I wasn't joking”
Most of it I learned from serving-girls,
Looking into eyes mindless as birds, taking
The pure for subject or the unaware.
When empty mouths so soon betray their fear
Kisses can be probes. Mine always were.

Yes, everywhere I sorted the betraying
Motive, point by point designed
This first detective-story of the heart,
Judge, jury, victim, all were in my aspect,
Pinned on the clear notation of the mind—
I primed them like an actor in a part.

I was my own motive, I see you smile.
The one part of me I *never* used or wrote,
Every comma paused there, hungry
To confess me, to reveal the famished note.

Yet in reason I mastered appetite,
And taught myself at last the tragic sense;
Then through appetite and its many ambushes
I uncovered the politics of feeling, dense
Groves for the flocks of sin to feed in.
Yet at the end the portrait always seemed
Somehow faked, or somehow still in need
of gender, form and present tense.

I could not get beyond this wall.

No. The bait of feeling was left untasted,
Deep inside like ruins lay the desires
To give, to trust, to be my subjects' equal,

All wasted, wasted.
Though love is not the word I want,
Yet it will have to do. There is no other.

So the great Lack grew and grew.
Of the Real Darkness not one grain I lifted.
Yet the whole story is here like the part
of some great man's body,
Veins, organs, nerves,
But unhappily illustrating neither death nor art.

Lawrence DURRELL.

CAIRO JAG.

Shall I get drunk or cut myself a piece of cake,
a pasty Syrian with a few words of English
or the Turk who says she is a princess—she dances
apparently by levitation? Or Marcelle, Parisienne
always preoccupied with her dull dead lover :
she has all the photographs and his letters
tied in a bundle and stamped *Décédé* in mauve ink.
All this takes place in a stink of jasmin.

But there are the streets dedicated to sleep
stenches and the sour smells, the sour cries
do not disturb their application to slumber
all day, scattered on the pavement like rags
afflicted with fatalism and hashish. The women
offering their children brown-paper breasts
dry and twisted, elongated like the skull,
Holbein's signature. But this stained white town
is something in accordance with mundane conventions—

Marcelle drops her Gallic airs and tragedy
suddenly shrieks in Arabic about the fare
with the cabman, links herself so
with the somnambulists and legless beggars :
it is all one, all as you have heard.

But by a day's travelling you reach a new world
the vegetation is of iron
dead tanks, gun barrels split like celery
the metal brambles have no flowers or berries
and there are all sorts of manure, you can imagine
the dead themselves, their boots, clothes and possessions
clinging to the ground, a man with no head
has a packet of chocolate and a souvenir of Tripoli.

Keith DOUGLAS.

TWO EPIGRAMS.

I.—INSCRIPTION FOR THE DRY FOUNTAIN AT RAMLEH STATION.

Where in the dark the Alexandrians wait,
Some for their tram, and others for their fate
(Venus or Bacos here the end in life)
I thirsty stand, remembering Lot's wife.

II.—ON E. W., AN ENGLISH GOVERNESS IN ATHENS.

If it was thwarted nature made you vex
Happier people with your poisoned tongue,
Could not God make you like the bee in sex,
And order you to perish when you stung?

Robert LINDELL.

TWO POEMS FROM RILKE.

I.—THE DEPARTURE OF THE PRODIGAL SON.

Now to depart from all that is entangled
and that is ours and yet is not our own,
that tremblingly reflects us, like the water
in old wells, and destroys our image;
from all this which, as though with thorns,
is once more clinging to us—to depart,
and suddenly to look
at This and Him one had no longer seen
(they were so daily and so ordinary) :
with gentleness, in reconciliation
to understand—as if at a beginning,
close up, and apprehending—how impersonally,
how over and above us all that suffering happened
of which our childhood had been full up to the brim— :
yet to depart, hand out of hand,
as if one tore again what had already healed,
and to depart : where? Into the uncertain,
far into some warm unrelated land
indifferent behind all action
like backcloth : garden, or a wall;
and to depart : why? Out of impulse, one's own nature,
impatience, dark expectancy, and out of
not being understood and one's not understanding.
To take all this upon oneself and drop
in vain what one perhaps had held,
to die alone, not knowing why—

Is that the entrance into a new life?

II.—THE ISLAND (NORTH SEA).

I

The flood to come will level out the path
there in the shallows, everything around
will be alike; but yonder little island
has closed its eyes; the dyke revolves,

bewildering, around its dwellers who are born
into a sleep in which they mutely intermingle
many worlds; they rarely speak,
each of their sentences is like an epitaph

for something that is washed up on their shore
and unfamiliar, coming unexplained to them
and staying. Everything their gaze describes

has been like that since childhood : not applied to them,
too great, and inconsiderate, and sent this way,
exaggerating their own loneliness still more.

II

As if it lay within a crater's ring
upon a moon : each farmstead has a dyke
around it, and the gardens inside are
all dressed the same, and combed the same,

like orphans, by that storm which so severely rears them
and frightens them for days with deaths.

Then people sit inside the houses
and see in slanting mirrors what strange things

are standing on the chests-of-drawers. In the evening
one of the sons steps out before the door
and draws a tune from the harmonica, as soft as weeping;

thus he had heard it in a foreign harbour—.
And on the outer dyke, one of the sheep adopts
very large outlines and is almost threatening.

III

Only what is within is near; all else is distant.
And this within is thronged and every day filled over-full
with everything, and quite untellable. The island
is like too small a star

which space does not perceive and silently destroys
in its unconscious formidableness,
so that the star, un-lit, un-heard,
alone,

(that all this should come to an end)
tries moving, dark, upon a self-invented course,
blindly, and not within the scheme
of planets, suns and systems.

Translated by Ruth SPEIRS.

FROM "THE NATURAL HISTORY OF THE PLAINS"

And the architecture various :
Along the Euphrates
men build with reeds like birds
and reed-men snare the lumbering geese.
Beduin tents are camel made,
the ropes and tattered coverings
all camel made;
and the men chew the cud,
wrapped in the camel hair,
jealous and testy as the beasts,
aware of small coin and the seasons.
On the long east escarpment
caves are roofs; they are aware
of nothing and cry at night like jackals;
one man somewhere, perhaps
in the limestone plain by Kasr el Heir,
sits in a Roman well that once had water.

West of Aleppo they live in huts
like bees, cells of the semi-nomad
mud on mud; and bee-men proffer
a thin sour milk in leather bowls,
their goatish hospitality.
At Sheizar over the water wheels
Arabs squat in the Byzantine castle—
stinking huts and rags and long-papped women
where the Greeks swaggered;
and always remain
the flapping hovels at the town's edge,

the Armenians alien as the traveller,
fearing the plains and the dreary wind.

And the soil various :

Northward sore as red meat
it bleeds in the winter rain;
beyond the fishy Orontes
is inky black, and fertile
past belief; even the scruffy dust
of the dun Hauran,
colour of their pye-dogs,
was once a granary. Not even
the desert is desert,
and the traveller is deceived.

And the birds various :

larks like sand and the red rock-creeper
brilliant among the ruins, in the steppe
the affronted bustard; and at dusk
Yeats' screaming birds unfit for food,
the scrawny desert grouse.

Sometimes, once

in a great while,

by the mud-banked Khabur,

a rarer bird, the arctic wader

with white vermiculated wings—

like the traveller migrant

across the plains.

Robin FEDDEN.

FLARE.

(Homs-Tripoli road).

Suddenly the flare dropped. The buxom hills
curved over backwards, fell open like a book,
swam up to meet it. The white roadside walls
sharp as a denture, bars and masses of black
behind the vast hard light, the vaster ring
of blindness, lay steely in the frightening
silence of a picture or a clock.

Clear as if airless, a moon-landscape; only
no saintly idiotic planet's face,
earthlight; but hot and horrible and lonely
that flower-sailing eye in menacing glass.

Beneath it, the earth stirring without lamps:
the awful breathing of a thousand camps;
the probing gun; animal watchfulness.

Death's haunted stables and the gunner's star:
oh Bethlehem again—and *what rough beast*
in a night wearing ceremonies of war
hid like a guilt? No singing on this coast;
no mercy in the impersonal honest sand
whose (the flare vanished) briefly open hand
shut suddenly to darkness like a fist.

Terence TILLER.

THE POET REVIEWS HIMSELF.

(*A Private Country* : *Lawrence Durrell*. *Faber*. 6/-).

The poetry in this volume is extremely fluent and highly coloured; and suffers perhaps from an excess of virtuosity in a number of respects. Nowhere however does it represent the contemporary tendency of the writer to hide a deficiency of experience under the cloak of technique—and there is a refreshing freedom from frigidity of expression.

Some original elements are worth attempting to isolate, since they are new to poetry. In the first place there is a good deal of unexpected humour to be found—some of which jars in its context. But the total impression given is that the writer is not attempting satire but a special irony which carries—rather disconcertingly—an overtone of compassion. This is an adult quality which he offsets with a technique in which the romantic elements predominate, but which is sufficiently well integrated to make its own way. This is from a poem to a sleeping child.

*This hand exploring the world makes
The diver's deep-sea fingers on the sills
Of underwater windows; all the wrecks
Of our world where the sad blood leads back
Through memory and sense like divers working.*

This from a ballad on "The Good Lord Nelson".

*Now the Good Lord Nelson had a swollen gland,
Little of the scriptures did he understand
Till a woman led him to a foreign land
Aboard the Victory.*

*Adam and Eve and a bushel of figs
Meant nothing to Nelson who was keeping pigs
Till a woman showed him the various rigs
Aboard the Victory.*

No technical contrivances can disguise a writer's real tone of voice, and here underneath the prolixity, the over-richness or the mordant Brown-ingesque larkiness of these poems one may detect something more than mere promise. Sometimes a line is hit off perfectly and sticks:

*Less than a nightingale ago
or again,
His virtues in him rough as towels.*

Sometimes a verse or a whole poem stands up and shines. For the rest, there are poems of a vaguely biographical kind, and poems of landscape; less successful and more strained are those in which private speculations and doubts are given expression. But you have in general an impression of a workman worth watching despite his irritating off-moments; and certainly this is a book to be bought rather than one which stands reading about.

L. D.